4. Antitheatricality and the Public Woman

Marianne Ehrmann’s *Amalie: A True Story in Letters*

Karoline Schulze-Kummerfeld’s memoirs were never published in her lifetime. For a description of the life of an actress from the perspective of a woman who had worked as one, eighteenth-century readers of German had to turn to a fictional source. Marianne Ehrmann’s *Amalie: A True Story in Letters* (*Amalie: eine wahre Geschichte in Briefen*, 1788) is a loosely autobiographical epistolary novel that portrays the trials and tribulations of a virtuous woman whose life circumstances catapult her out of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere—and, eventually, onto the stage—at a very young age. The novel’s grounding in Ehrmann’s own life trajectory might make the answer to the question of why she wrote about the theater and performance seem obvious: it contributes to the realism and veracity of her story. But, in fact, Ehrmann’s engagement with the theater in this novel goes beyond simple verisimilitude, for it also opens up an opportunity for her to confront the discourse of antitheatricality that put public women like herself in an impossible position and to challenge the notion that virtuous women had no appropriate space or activity in the public sphere.

In *Amalie*, Ehrmann creates a model for ideal femininity that simultaneously embraces the association of ideal femininity with sincerity and antitheatricality and disconnects that sincerity from its discursive connection to female “nature” and “naiveté.” *Amalie* proposes instead that the Ideal Woman is knowledgeable about both herself
and the world, and that her proper behavior and activity stems from the kind of self-reflexivity and self-awareness that is generally precluded by true naiveté. At the same time, the novel reveals the impossibility of a woman simply “being” who she really “is” once she leaves the domestic sphere, as the mere fact of being in public puts her at the mercy of other people’s interpretation of her. Like Schulze-Kummerfeld, Ehrmann shows that female subjectivity does not exist in a social vacuum: it must be correctly perceived by a social audience. The depiction of Amalie’s difficulties in making her “true” self readable thus contradicts the novel’s intention of presenting ideal femininity as an embodiment of sincere, antitheatrical being, as it—unwittingly, perhaps—also reveals ideal femininity as essentially a masquerade, as that which must not be performed and at the same time cannot not be performed.

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MARIANNE EHRMANN AND THE “TRUE STORY” OF AMALIE

Marianne Ehrmann published her first novel, Amalie, in 1788, a few years after abandoning acting in favor of writing. The novel had been preceded by three other works: Leisure Hours of a Gentlewoman (Müssige Stunden eines Frauenzimmers, 1784), which contained eighteen letters that would later form the beginning of Amalie; Philosophy of a Woman (Philosophie eines Weibs, 1784), a highly successful, seventy-two-page booklet that engages with and offers a veiled critique of Rousseau’s ideas about gender relations; and a play, Frivolity and a Good Heart, or the Results of Education (Leichtsinn und Gutes Herz, oder die Folgen der Erziehung, 1786).¹ In the year she published Amalie, Ehrmann also published two other novels and a short booklet entitled Little Fragments for Women Thinkers (Kleine Fragmente für Denkerinnen). She then moved into journal publishing, first as a contributor to her husband Theophil Ehrmann’s The Observer (Der Beobachter), and then with her own women’s periodical, which appeared first under the title Amalie’s Leisure Hours (Amaliens